

Creative designers of wonders, words and worlds



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

In the summer of 1918, three famous men arrived in Asheville in amazing new contraptions called automobiles. They were on a road trip and preferred to camp, but they were also tired from their adventure which had taken them all the way from Pittsburgh on rough “roads.” Ready to set up tents in the Chunns Cove area, they were persuaded to spend the night in a fancy new hotel named The Grove Park Inn. These men were recognized around the world for their wizardry work. One invented the lights shining in the hotel that night; another wrote books that could be read by the Inn’s huge stone fireplace; and the third constructed the very cars they traveled in. Their names were Thomas Edison, John Burroughs and Henry

Ford.

While preparing to teach two fall courses, I enjoyed some “lighter” summer reading: “American Journey: On the Road with Henry Ford, Thomas Edison and John Burroughs.” Having previously read a biography of Edison, and having taught several classes on the naturalist John Burroughs, I was drawn to the story of how these geniuses became friends and traveled together. I was even more intrigued by the fact they drove through so many states during an influenza epidemic and a world war. Each man brought his unique skills, humor and curiosity to the road trips, each driven by a deep love for the natural world.

As I was finishing the book, I listened to a discussion between an Evangelical author and a former Evangelical pastor. At one point they were agreeing to disagree about a “Designer” who made the universe. This led me back to the old question: Is there a Creative Designer of our world, of the universe? Debated for centuries, the question is like a conver-

sation on a road trip over bumpy roads, often lost in the wilderness of opinions. Each of the gentlemen on that 1918 journey would probably answer this question affirmatively: Yes, the world has been and is being created now, but by what or whom? They may have agreed on one fundamental response: All has been created, crafted, invented, manufactured...by Nature — all the natural forces including the natural force of the human mind.

In impressionably youthful days, we were told by Christian “apologists” that there are air-tight proofs for a Designer. One of the most compelling, or so we felt then, was the structure of the human eye. How could “blind chance” create such an exquisite, intricate mechanism? No, the best explanation was obvious: Almighty God...our God...the Christian God...the Evangelical Christian God (to be specific). The Great Inventor of all things in heaven and Earth was indisputably the one in our hearts, who spoke in the Bible, who hears our prayers and guides our lives.

It doesn’t take deep reflection on these “apologetics” to run into some ruts on muddy roads. A God who creates an eye also creates its deterioration over perhaps 70 or 80 years. In other words, an eye is amazing, but it doesn’t last long. Same for a brain, or the whole human body. Why make the effort to create something of beauty that functions so poorly over time? And, if the creator cared for his creation so much, why not make it built to last? (Genesis tells us early humans could live hundreds of years, so what happened?).

I’ve learned through the years, you can’t convince a person their “proof” for a Designer doesn’t hold much water. It’s simply too difficult for them to consider: Which God is the Inventor — the biblical God, Brahma, Allah? They find it uncomfortable to contemplate the rational alternative: Why not Nature? Some argue that doesn’t explain everything, the incredible eye and brain and galaxies. I suppose it’s just too irritating to hear the

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unapologetic response: Nature, through the long process of evolution, makes more sense (Edison went so far as to suggest: “life itself had reached the earth from space”).

Reading “American Journey,” I was reminded of Henry Ford’s anti-semitism. He blamed “The Jews” for the world’s problems. Such a great mind with limited mileage, like one of his Model T’s. When Ford ranted that a boyhood friend of Burroughs was probably a Jew, Burroughs corrected him — the man was a Presbyterian, not Jewish. Later, Burroughs wrote: “He would

probably attribute an eclipse to the Jews.” As I see it, Henry Ford’s prejudice made as much sense as his disagreement with Edison over the future of vehicles. Edison had already made an electric car that had gone over 100 miles on a charge, but Ford held to his internal combustion engines. Some narrow minds aren’t easily changed.

The inventors who became good

friends on the road, were driven to wonder along their creative journey.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (www.chighland.com).